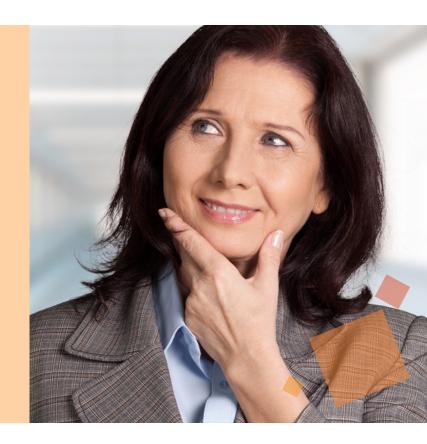# PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

USING AN ACTION CYCLE TO FIND THE RIGHT "FIT" IN A PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDER

Professional support, including supervision and mentoring, is a necessary part of reflective practice and lifelong learning required of speech pathologists. The value of professional support is emphasised in Speech Pathology Australia's new Certification Program and is a requirement for speech pathologists to renew their membership.

Speech pathologists may question how to determine which support partner and type of support partnership is best suited to their context. The SPA resource, Planning your CPD: Optimising professional learning, recommends an Action Cycle which can guide members in identifying support that is the best fit for them.

PLAN

A useful first step is to determine what you need to gain from a professional support partnership and to consider how you learn. Effective planning may include the following steps:

- **Identify your purpose for learning.** You might seek to upskill in new practice areas or techniques, or to expand your knowledge in current practice areas.

- **Determine your learning goals.** Your goals might be to increase knowledge, capacity to exercise skills and techniques, or your confidence in doing so.

- **Establish your current level of knowledge or skill.** In this step, identify what you already know and if you are performing at an introductory, intermediate, or advanced level.

- **Consider various learning modes.** Reflect on your personal learning style and needs. Do you require in-person support or observation? Can you gain the knowledge and skills you need in online interactions? Is individual or group support best-suited to your needs? Does your workplace require specific modes of support?

- **Assess practical considerations.** Professional support may be affected by scheduling, cost, or availability of a support provider. It is important to understand logistical constraints that may impact a support partnership.

In cases where professional support is determined by the workplace (e.g. a supervisor is assigned to an employee) the planning process can help speech pathologists express their learning needs to a supervisor or manager, establish effective professional support agreements, evaluate and make changes to the professional support partnership, or prepare to seek additional professional support.
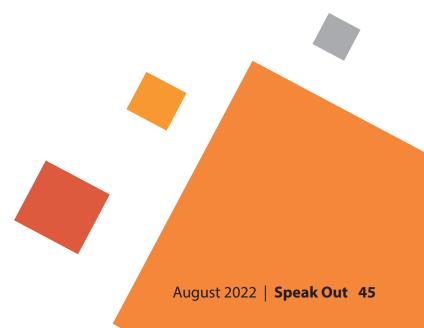
APPRAISE

Once you have planned and identified your support needs, you can begin to appraise partnership types. A variety of support types are described in the Association's Position Statement on Professional Support, and include:

- **Supervisors** typically support a speech pathologist in their current scope of practice and caseload. Supervision can occur individually or in a group. Supervisors are often qualified speech pathologists. But where support is needed that is not specific to the professional Scope of Practice, supervision may be provided by other relevant, qualified individuals.

- **Mentors** offer support for expanding a speech pathologist's scope of practice into new practice areas or related professional skills. Like supervisors, mentors may be qualified speech pathologists or individuals with experience that is relevant to the member's learning needs.

- **Peer Supervision** is a formalised support partnership that occurs between similarly experienced professionals.

- **Peer Support,** like other partnerships, can foster reflective practice, collaboration and problem solving. However, these informal forms of support typically do not include the agreement, or documented learning goals and outcomes required by the new Certification Program.

- **Communities of Practice** "are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain," (**Wenger-Trayner, 2015**). These and other types of group learning can offer support and insight into professional learning.

- **Coaches** who are not qualified speech pathologists would not provide guidance specific to professional practice. Instead, they could support speech pathologists to identify goals, engage in self-reflection, and to elicit and implement self-directed solutions and strategies that positively impact their professional development.

It is also important to appraise a partner's capacity to support you. Refer back to what you identified as your learning needs during the planning phase and ask about:

- **Experience:** What experience does the support partner have in your area of practice? Sector? Workplace setting? What relevant professional development have they engaged in? Will their knowledge and experience support you, at your current skill level, to engage in evidence-based practice or to expand your scope of practice? Do they have experience providing the type of support you seek? Have they undertaken any learning to provide professional support (e.g. supervision training or coaching courses)? Tools like the **HealthWorkforce Australia National Clinical Supervision Competency Resource** may help you and potential partners understand the knowledge and skills required to offer effective support.

- **Interaction:** Is the support partner's engagement style compatible with your learning style and needs? Where there are differences, can these be managed effectively? How do you each manage problems that arise in professional relationships?

- **Practicalities:** Are they able to interact with you in the modality (e.g. in-person, online, individually or in a group) that best suits your needs? What are the costs or scheduling constraints of the support partnership?

ENGAGE

After you have identified a suitable support provider, you can help ensure a successful partnership by establishing a **written agreement, documented learning goals, and participate in self-reflection on learning.**

These will help guide your interactions and assist each of you to actively engage in learning. You and the person offering you professional support can make engagement more effective by:

- **Preparing for interactions** by completing assignments or readings and identifying outcomes or learning for each session.

- **Actively engaging in the interaction** by asking questions and relating information to specific professional contexts.

- **Maximising the interaction** by integrating new knowledge into your practice, following up on additional assignments or reading, and measuring learning outcomes.

EVALUATE

All support partnerships, even those that appear productive and effective, benefit from regular evaluation. It can be helpful to program evaluations at pre-planned intervals. It is also important to engage in spontaneous evaluations together as needed.

Once again, it is helpful to refer to the planning stage of the **Action Cycle** and reflect on how each of your learning needs are being met in the partnership. You can assess progress on your learning goals. Discuss whether your engagement/learning styles and modes of interaction are effective. Review whether practical constraints like costs and scheduling are successfully managed. Be open to feedback from the support provider on factors related to your performance and participation.

It can be difficult to discuss course corrections with supervisors and other support providers. However, **preparing for challenging conversations** can help you to express your needs, request changes in a professional and productive manner, and to accept any changes that would be helpful for you to make.

The evaluation process can also help you determine when it is not possible to make sufficient changes within a partnership. The information gathered during regular evaluations can support your discussion about why a current partnership should be concluded and assist as you plan to seek new partnerships.

CONCLUSION

As with other forms of learning, employing an Action Cycle can help with each stage of Professional Support. Speech pathologists can thoughtfully Plan, Appraise, Engage and Evaluate to participate in more successful support partnerships.

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